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ABSTRACT

A focus on letter writing in composition classes can eliminate the problem of writing to the teacher as audience, as well as function as a strategy for teaching the elements of rhetoric. Letters in the context of the rhetorical process have historical precedent. In the Middle Ages, because of the necessity for official and ceremonious letters, letter writing became a recognized profession and accepted matter for education. Writing manuals reviewed both grammar and rhetoric, including lists of figures of speech from poetry, thus compelling attention to elegance. Sixteenth century writing prescriptions called for brevity, perspective, liveliness, and appropriateness to both the writer and the reader. Whatever its history, the lessons of letter writing are worth noting here. First, students needing to build confidence about writing generally respond to free writing, such as in a conversational letter to a friend. Second, letters to specific audiences each have a particular organization and style. By writing to specific audiences, the situation is made realistic, authenticity of expression naturally follows, and the necessity for correctness and the level of usage become clear to the student. The classical mandates of completeness, clarity, and conciseness take on significance. (HTH)

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Letter-Writing to Achieve Rhetorical Goals

Ernestine P. Sewell

When teachers of composition get together, there is much talk about the difficulties of dealing with illiterate students, the more-or-less successful strategies they have tried, but very little if anything about their failures. I have a confession to make: I have failed to turn the students away from the teacher as audience for their compositions. My advanced students are quite vocal about the purpose of writing classes; specifically, they want to know how to meet their professors' criteria for writing in order to get a degree. The prospective teachers want reinforcement for passing on skills to help their students get a diploma. A few aspire to writing finished, polished prose for publication. The fact remains that students as a whole apparently have not been affected by our repeated injunction to determine an audience other than teacher for goal-oriented writing. They still say "What do you want?"

My suggestion is to focus on letter-writing. In a typical situation the teacher stands before the composition class. Formalities are out of the way. Relaxed, the teacher begins familiar chit-chat, attempting to engage the students in discussion of the value to them of learning to write well. The ready answer is "to get through school--or college." A few may say "to write reports on the job." A more thoughtful answer and one that evokes the sought-after discussion is "to write letters." We may be reminded of a sequence of Peanuts where Marcy and Sir talk about handwriting and decide it is nothing to worry about because "The only things people write anymore are love letters and thank you notes." The students do recognize letter-writing as a pragmatic, useful concern.

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Those of you who have read All About Letters, the 1979 publication distributed by the United States Postal Service in cooperation with the NCTE, are aware of the appeal to write in the variety of articles, such as "Letters Play a Part in Everyone's Life - and Sometimes Beyond!", "With a Pen Pal, You're Never Lonely," "Stars Glow When They Get Fan Mail," "Dear Abbey' on Letter Writing," and the excellent suggestions and models provided for letters of admission to college, job letters, consumer letters, letters of inquiry, and letters to the editor. That it provides material for "meaningful letter-writing projects for all four years of high school," to quote a reviewer, is beyond question.

All About Letters is a valuable supplement to the units on letter-writing found in current widely-used texts. At the secondary level, I have examined Modern English in Action (Christ, 1978), English Grammar and Composition (Warriner, 1977), Basic Language (John, Yates, and Delaney, 1978), Building English Skills (McDougal, 1978), American English Today (Guth, 1977) and discovered that there is little difference in the brief letter-writing units from the ones I studied several years ago. We were presented forms to imitate. Then we wrote invitations, worried over letters of condolence and bread-and-butter notes, wrote area Chambers of Commerce for information about their towns, and attempted to write letters of application for jobs at the local dime store, grocery store, or restaurant. By and large these models for imitation appear at the ninth grade level and are repeated monotonously through the twelfth. The writing of the letter is an end in itself and stands isolated from the larger rhetorical purposes.

At the college level, D'Angelo, McCrimmon, Brooks and Warren, and Hairston fail to include reference to letter-writing. Hairston, in a short address to the student, agrees with Marcy and Sir that, after graduation, students will write letters. Gregory and Elizabeth Cowan in Writing (John Wiley and Sons, 1980) emphasize the letter of application: creating, shaping, completing, the conventions of, and reasons for writing it. Jim W. Corder in Contemporary Writing (Scott, Foresman, 1979) is the sole rhetorician I have found to share with students the usefulness of letter-writing to achieve variety of expression, voice or tone, and persuasive techniques. He, as does Ross Winterowd in one instance, uses model letters by Samuel Johnson, Ralph W. Emerson, Bill Nye, E. B. White, and Hawthorne for motivation.

Of the dozen or so secondary school and college texts examined which have a section on letter-writing, only one attempts to place letter-writing in the context of rhetorical process.

What could develop into renewed interest in the writing of letters has historical precedent. From Seneca the Western world has an epistolary tradition of stellar proportions. The Roman dramatist/writer encouraged clarity and simplicity; moreover, he implied the virtue of authenticity when he wrote:

"Letters reveal the true self and give more accurate images than pictures."

And Morris Croll, in his commentary on the Senecan tradition in Attic and Baroque Prose Style (Eds., J. Max Patrick and Robert O. Evans) states:

"Letter-writing aims . . . to move and please, as well as to teach, but it is distinguished from oratory by the fact that it owes its persuasive power to a vivid and acute portrayal of individual experience than to the histrionic and sensuous expression of general ideas." During the Middle Ages, letter-writing

became an acknowledged art. Because of the necessity for official and ceremonious letters, dictamen, writing of letters, became a recognized profession and accepted matter for education. In fact, along with sermons, dictamen was the predominant mode of writing. As Latin was the official language, letters became allied with law, order, and diplomacy and that is perhaps the reason why the curriculum removed the study of literature from the epistolary tradition.

Medieval manuals for letter-writing were numerous, often giving reviews of both grammar and rhetoric; sometimes they were simple formularies. Rhetorically, the concern of the manuals was precision: correctness of language, exactitude, systematic verification, precaution against tampering with truth, technical skill in observance of exact and appropriate diction, and rhythmical expression. The fuller manuals included lists of figures of speech common to poetry. Dictamen, therefore, in addition to giving exercises in correctness, compelled attention to elegance.

Immediately adaptable were the classical parts of a speech. The exordium and narration were cardinal in dictamen. The partition, confirmation, refutation, and peroration had general correspondences. Further significance of dictamen is found by scholars who see it as a factor in the emergence of English as the official language and later as a force in the development of standard English usage and prose style. Because of the framework dictamen provided, the fifteenth century legal students, the "benchers," at the Inns of Court, London, felt secure in their pursuit of clear, effective, precise, direct, communication in the native language.

It is not the purpose of this presentation to give a history of letter-writing; several other formularies deserve comment, however. The tradition of letter-writing as that part of the educational curriculum where prose composition was taught remained stable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One book The Enimie of Idlenesse (1568), written by William Fullwood, a merchant tailor, was a formulary which provided models for imitation and specific recommendations for writing exposition and persuasion. He further stated that a letter can be divided into cause, intent, and consequence, like a logical argument, with a major thesis, a minor thesis, and a conclusion.

Angel Day's The English Secreterie (1586) went through three editions. It has models of descriptive, laudatory, interpretive, deliberative, hortatory, conciliatory, consolatory, amatory, judicial, and familiar letters. It has a section on stylistics and the uses of figures, and refers to invention and arrangement.

It requires no mental leap to take the sixteenth century prescriptions of Lipsius and move them into modern rhetorical practice. Letters must have brevitas, perspicuitas, simplicitas, venustas (liveliness), and decentia (appropriateness). The prime quality is brevity. Decentia has two aspects: the writing must be appropriate to the writer and must also consider the person to whom it is addressed. Lipsius also emphasized the appropriateness of the sentence style to subject matter. The work of Lipsius was adapted to English and popularized by Ben Jonson.

Regardless of one's theory of rhetorical goals, the lessons to be derived from the practice of letter-writing are worth remarking. I should like to demonstrate how students can realize James L. Kinneavy's theory of discourse through letter-writing.

First, writes Kinneavy, discourse can stress the personality of the encoder, giving authenticity to self-expression. Students, needing confidence that they can write, generally respond to free writing (unless they are made to fear they will be psychoanalyzed by the teacher). They can be asked to address their diaries, or express something conversationally in a letter to a friend, or write to Dear Abbey for a cathartic use of language. All of these lend themselves to free writing exercises, focussed or unfocussed, with the advantage that the figure of the teacher is effaced.

The second use of discourse, according to Kinneavy, focusses on the other person involved in the process, the decoder. This is a reference use of language in which the writer may assume a persona, a mask, disguise himself to get the reader to do something or believe something. So it may promote some issue, as in a letter to a legislator, or a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. The writing may be informative as the letter written home to describe life in the dormitory, or to inform someone of a recent protest movement that took place on campus. Or the writing may be exploratory, asking for information, or involving oneself in a discussion of a problem not resolved. Even when the writing is scientific and writer/reader intrusion is verboten, the conscious awareness of an expressed audience can only lead to greater efficacy.

Likewise, in literary discourse in which the writer focusses on a product: a story, poem, novel, film, or TV show, there may be little writer/reader orientation. In this kind of writing the work is appreciated for its structure, for the components that have made it what it is. Still, the student may write a friend, or perhaps the author to develop skills for writing or evaluating the work of art. It is of greatest significance that the writer determine a decoder other than the teacher, or we shall continue to receive sterile assemblages of other critics' ideas.

It appears to me that Kinneavy's goals for writing are realistic. But the teacher could take any text and adapt the rhetorical goals to letter-writing. Each type of writing calls for its peculiar and particular organization and style. My preference for Kinneavy's theory lies in the importance it places on audience, the decoder. By setting up the writing experience as a letter, the figure of the teacher as audience is diminished, the situation is made a realistic one, authenticity of expression naturally follows, the necessity for correctness and level of usage becomes clear to the student. And the classical mandates of completeness, clarity, and conciseness take on significance for him or her.

Those who would doubt the advantages I claim may point to the effusive, slangy, ungrammatical "friendly" letter students may resort to. The teacher can thwart this by introductory discussions of goals and, at the college level, something of the history of letter-writing may be useful to develop an attitude of serious intent. The other disadvantage may be that the student writes too briefly. This problem may be overcome by providing models for imitation. Some of the greatest writing in the records of Western civilization has been framed in the epistle.

The advantages outweigh the disadvantages: 1) the student has the security of a form to follow; 2) as soon as he or she has put pen to a salutation that names a specific decoder, he or she is committed to clarity and correctness; and, finally, the purpose of the writing having been specified in the introduction, the framer of the letter will find the structure and style dictated by the subject matter, not imposed artificially as something learned from a textbook. Further, the very act of closing the writing formally and placing a signature at the end of the letter has a psychological effect of forcing upon the writer recognition of the obligation he or she has assumed to make the message an effective one for the decoder.

If this approach to writing is implemented, letter-writing, a recognized pragmatic reason for learning to write, may become, as this paper suggests, the entry way to rhetorical goals. The least that can be expected is that letter-writing will be restored to a significant and integral place in the study of writing, with appropriate respect for the encoder-decoder contract.